



For more than 20 years, the Hispanic Youth Symposium has helped Latino students reach their potential.

Hispanic Youth Symposium: Making a real difference for Idaho's Latino students

Alumna Karla Mora shares her experiences with this 21-year Idaho tradition

By [Sarah Robertson](#), INL Communications & Governmental Affairs

Since its inception in 1990, over 5,000 Latino students from throughout Idaho have attended the Hispanic Youth Symposium (HYS). Twenty-one years later, 300 students converged on Sun Valley during the last week in April to participate in this life-changing event.

The symposium was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, contractors at Idaho National Laboratory, Gem State Diversity Initiatives (GSDI), state agencies and private employers. Educational institutions awarding scholarships were: Gonzaga University, College of Western Idaho, Eastern Idaho Technical College, Utah State University, Northwest Nazarene University, University of Montana, Boise State University, Idaho State University, College of Idaho, University of Idaho, Brigham Young University-Idaho, Lewis-Clark State College and College of Southern Idaho. Several schools also offered College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) scholarships. In addition, GSDI awarded scholarships for all competitive events as well as to students showing promise — \$1,000 to seniors (Si Se Puede) and \$500 to juniors (Querer Es Poder).

The symposium grew out of a 1988 brainstorming session centered on ways to curb the alarming 60+ percent dropout rate for Latino teens in Idaho. Over the years, the dropout rate has significantly improved, but it remains the highest of any ethnic group in the state. The organizers of the Hispanic Youth Symposium know this, and are working hard to make a real difference in the lives of these deserving students. Graduates of the program have gone on to college and then to successful careers. Seeing demonstrations and interacting with professionals who are active in science, engineering and other technical disciplines can make a lasting impression on students considering potential careers.



Hispanic Youth Symposium alumni, Karla Mora (photo courtesy of Allison Corona Photography).

The stories from HYS alumni are heartfelt and poignant. Many of the students had never dreamed they would have an opportunity to attend college, but as they say at the symposium, "Si se puede" – it can be done! Many of them are doing their part now to give back to their communities and to help other students that are in a similar position as they once were.

Mija, tu puedes

One such alumna, Karla Mora of Idaho Falls, shared her story during the student panel at this year's symposium. Before HYS, Mora was a shy girl living a turbulent and sometimes traumatic life. When many of her fellow classmates were hitting the books during their high-school years, Mora found herself floundering. Her future was uncertain, but that all changed when she was accepted to attend the Hispanic Youth Symposium.

Attending the symposium was not a given for Mora. Her grades were always an issue, and even an aide at her school didn't have faith that she could ever be accepted to college. One day while sitting in her guidance counselor's office, the counselor asked, "Karla, where are you going to college?" The question caught her by surprise. Looking around the office, she noticed an aide holding an application for Utah State University and replied, "Utah State." The aide just laughed and said, "Sorry Karla, but I know you will not get accepted there."

Stung by the aide's hurtful remark, Mora was surprised when her counselor handed her an acceptance letter from the Hispanic Youth Symposium. Angerily, she tossed it into the garbage when she got home that day from school. She had no intentions of going, and she figured the only reason she was accepted was because there weren't more Latinos in her school. Mora didn't get off that easily. Later that afternoon, she noticed the letter in her room. Her mother had retrieved it from the trash and written on it with bold red marker, "Mija, tu puedes" – little girl, you can. "I thought about it all day and finally came to the conclusion that I owed it to my mom to do something to make her proud," she said.

The valley where dreams are born

The surroundings at the Sun Valley Inn are certainly impressive. The scenic views are breathtaking and the lodge is impeccable. Everything is polished and expensive-looking and the staff is friendly and always very professional. As the students step off the buses and find their rooms, you can see the awe in their faces. Mora was astounded.



"They were treating me like royalty, like someone important," she said. "I felt so privileged that for the first time in my life, I paid attention."

Instead of chatting with her friends or staring at the cute boys in the sessions, Mora listened and soaked up everything she could. Her newfound focus paid off the next year when she was offered a two-year full-tuition scholarship to Utah State University. She knew this was an opportunity that would change her life — and the lives of her family — forever.

"When I came home, I remembered walking into the door and (my mother) looked at me with tears streaming down her face," Mora said. "I was shocked because she did not come hug me — instead, she went to her room. I followed her and when I opened the door, I saw her kneeling and thanking God and La Virgencita over and over again."

If you would like to learn more about the Hispanic Youth Symposium and how you can get involved, go to www.inl.gov/hys or you can “like” them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/IdahoHYS.

Si, se puede

Mora's life has changed dramatically since attending HYS. She's majoring in psychology at Utah State and spending her free time giving back to the community in many different ways. She's currently the president of the Multicultural Recruitment Committee, and she's had the opportunity to mentor 200 low-income high school students in the GEAR UP program. She's even watched many of those students receive college acceptance letters and scholarships.

"What amazes me the most is the moment when their names are called — I cry just like I cried when it was me, because I believe in them," she said.

Mora hopes to complete her Ph.D. in clinical psychology so she can work with battered women and children who have suffered from any type of abuse. "I feel that there are many individuals that are struggling with a secret or unfortunate event that is tormenting them inside," Mora said. "If I could be the one to let peace inside and change their life, it would be the best job in the world." Her urge to help people extends also to the Latino community. Mora is a tireless advocate, and hopes to be able to help those who may not be able to afford a psychologist. "In my mind everyone deserves to be heard and receive help," she said.

As Mora spoke during the student panel, it was amazing to see her transformation. The once shy and frightened high school student is now an eloquent, energetic speaker with a zest for life and for helping others. The students in the audience listened to her intently. As she left the stage, many students approached her and the other panelists to learn more and to swap email addresses and phone numbers.

Asked what it meant for her to have the opportunity to attend HYS and to go on to college, she humbly explained that it was not just an opportunity for her, but it also opened the door for her family and community to take the steps needed to improve their own situations in life. And hopefully they would also have the chance to go to college. She sees herself as a role model for others, and hopes the leadership skills she is honing now will help her as she moves on with her bright and promising future.

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